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P. A. Smith  
1862

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“WAR” is a generic term. Nations go to war with each other. A plaintiff in court is said to be “at war” with the defendant; and the principles of good and evil are said to be “at war.” In this latter sense, the United States are now involved in war, and in no other sense. Secret treason, avowed rebellion, and organized force, have developed themselves in a portion of our territory; and the Federal Government is now maintaining its supremacy, as it has done before,—in the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania, in the “Burns case,” in hanging pirates, and punishing breaches of the revenue and other laws. We are suppressing an “armed rebellion,” and not carrying on a war between nations. Careless use of words leads to the confusion of ideas; and it is important that this simple fact should be borne in mind. The nation is “at war” with rebellion,—boasting, armed, and organized. This is not the first similar event in our history. But, in all previous instances, the insignificance of the forces in the rebellious attempts

has left them before the public eye in their true colors and in their absurdity. Now the organization of hundreds of thousands of soldiers to uphold and sustain a rebellion, seems, by some magnifying process, to have changed the crushing of a rebellion into a war, in the popular mind.

Our national existence is in the Federal Government. The several States make up the body politic of the nation ; which, like other bodies, is composed of members. No one member, or any number of members short of the whole, can represent our nationality. "The United States of America," composed of States, is the union of the States. It has an existence, it has a flag, and it has a place among nations. It has had its struggles, it has had its successes, and it has had its plague-spot. It is now struggling for its existence as a body politic. It is carrying on war for its existence and entireness as a whole, for its entity as a nation ; and may Heaven speed the issue !

It is the consciousness of the enormous magnitude of this issue which has stirred the heart of the country, and sent forth so speedily so many of her sons armed for her support. It is not the appreciation by each individual, who has gone to the war, of the importance of the question involved in it, so much as an enlightened public opinion, which has filled the ranks of our regiments. The boy-soldier, who, dying, said he left his home "to fight for the stars and stripes," was an exponent of public opinion. Little he recked whether we were fighting with a "belligerent power,"

or with our own rebellious members. This public opinion, sound and true, must sustain itself in its purity. It must not be diverted by false lights, by false hopes, or side-issues, from the impregnable position that we are fighting for our national existence.

These remarks are induced by signs, afforded by the press and otherwise, that this true issue is not clearly before all minds. There are indications that the great heart of the North, whose pulsations keep time with the march of Freedom, is allowing itself to bewilder its judgment. In times of struggle and difficulty, the heart must aid the mind; but it must not control it. The passions rise from the heart, blessing or cursing as they are good or evil; but sure to bring a curse if they gain the ascendancy over the judgment or the faculties of the mind. The coolest judgment and bewildering passion united together when Anderson left Fort Sumter, to cause the uprising of a great people. Indifference vanished. It was by reason of calm judgment that Massachusetts sprang into the field, and aided to complete the safety of the national capital; and it was unreflecting passion which led to the ovations to Gen. Anderson, who, being an honorable, high-toned soldier, will himself admit that the praise which was his due was for merely doing manfully his duty. So the laudation of Com. Wilkes was an explosion of passion from millions of hearts, which, having long waited for something to be done, could not control themselves when

a blow was struck. Right or wrong, the striker of that blow was heroized. Look at the reverse, and see how different the popular appreciation might have been. Suppose the Federal Government could have foreseen the future ; and, quietly saying to Com. Wilkes that it did not blame him, had sent Mason and Slidell to England (with a despatch of the same tenor with Mr. Seward's letter to Lord Lyons) in such season as to have met the English demand on the ocean on its way to Washington : — would Mr. Seward have had a dinner, or a serenade, or a cheer, given him ? Would not hisses for him have taken the place of the hurrahs for Com. Wilkes ? And yet the calm, cool judgment of the nation readily acquiesced in and sustained the course which Mr. Seward finally adopted. The heart's impulse to applaud Com. Wilkes was instantly checked by the action of reason which the circumstances compelled. Good judgment, therefore, as distinguished from temporary impulse, ought to be the motive and basis of the actions of the Government and its military leaders. Happily, thus far, it has been so ; and now let no petty squabbles or personal recriminations, or even disappointment at delay, make any obstruction to the calm exercise of the cool judgment of those on whom the responsibility rests.

Speeches and letters and toasts have lately indicated the existence of a desire in some quarters to make the emancipation of the slaves, at least, one of the objects of the war. This is a sad error in

judgment. It ignores the true issue. It would make us a by-word, if we of the North were to carry a war into the South to enforce *abolition*. To adopt such an error would palsy the hands of those who now, with clear consciences, are contending for the suppression of rebellion. There is no student of our history who would not see at a glance how insufficient and unjustifiable emancipation would be as a cause or aim of a war against "the South" on the part of "the North." The whole country has, for more than one generation, acquiesced in the doctrine, that slavery was a curse, to be borne by those on whose shoulders it was left by their fathers, cruel as the tunic Nessus sent to Hercules. Slavery has been well said to be a "state of suppressed war." — "The North" is not now fighting: it is the nation. The existence of slavery, its unexpected increase, and the efforts for its extension, are, with the desire for its abolition, undoubtedly causes of the war; but "abolition" is not its object, and cannot be included in the ulterior views of those, who, secure in their position of principle, are calm enough to see the evils which must result from any change of that position. It is the rebels who have raised the cry, that we are covertly making the abolition of slavery our real object in the war. They reiterate the statement, to incite the lukewarm slaveholders in their own borders. It is not the statement of the nation.

The phrase "military necessity" has been often used, of late, to denote the requirements of certain

unexpected combinations of circumstances, on which no orders previously issued could be brought to bear. Gen. Butler acted, in his treatment of “contrabands,” as if a military necessity had arisen. His treatment has not been censured; and the question, of how the Government will act, remains open. So it should remain. Each case in which this question arises has its own peculiar circumstances, and must be dealt with individually. It is enough to say in this connection, that any definite rules affecting house-servants and field-hands, and applying to all places, would be as futile as it would be absurd to expect that the daily amount of food for every individual in the land could be the same. The practical gain towards the realization of the blessing of emancipation, which the war may produce, will be adverted to hereafter ; but let not the heart control the mind. Who now defends regicides ? A pure, and even a holy impulse is no justification of a wrongful act. A righteous end does not excuse the use of unrighteous means. The nation has a high duty to perform. The power of self-government is on trial, in our case, before the tribunal of the world. To us is committed the heavy burden of sustaining the principles of democracy beneath the scowls and gibes — ay, and the attacks — of monarchists and monarchies. Let us govern ourselves. Let us use force to subdue treason, and give to all nations proof of our self-sustaining power, and of our determination to stand by our principles.

To attain this end, public opinion must support the Government. Angels will not fill the Federal offices, and we are obliged to elect men. No man is always wise, and errors and disappointments will continue. Recognizing this, we must undertake to judge of the general conduct of the Administration, rather than of every detail of its action. If its avowed principles are sound, let us trust their application in practice to those whom we have selected to administer the Government. The President has approved himself to those who love the Union. Why should the course adopted by him be impeded by passionate appeals for "a decree of emancipation of all the slaves"? Our Government does not issue "decrees;" and, if it did, such a decree would be illegal, and of no effect. When our troops entered Beaufort, they found the houses stripped by the slaves of masters, who, by running away, practically emancipated the slaves. Their masters can never regain them. There are about six thousand of them, by the latest accounts, now paid laborers. This may be one of the means provided by a merciful Providence for ridding the nation of a burden which is at once a crime and a curse. If it is so, let us gratefully receive the blessing; but let us remember that it is an incident, and not an object, of the existing war. If the advancing steps of our army carry with them emancipation, we may rejoice; but the steps must not be taken for that purpose.

Public opinion may be said to be the recognized

aggregate of individual opinions. It is what is believed to be the opinion of a majority of the minds of the people. It is, in its nature, inexact, and it is constantly changing ; and its decrees are without form or substance. It is affected often by a breath. Suppose a man who loves the Union, and means to uphold it, vexed by delay, utters complaints at the civil or military authorities : his ill-considered words may do immeasurable harm. Bad as this is, the effort of passion-led men, “of one idea,” to make emancipation the policy of the Government, is worse.

Among the false lights which bewilder public opinion, and render its conclusions erroneous, is a sensitiveness to foreign opinion, which might be supposed to be utterly inconsistent with the spirit of our nation. Curiosity has something to do with the matter ; but sensitiveness has more. It was an English poet who said, “Act well your part; there all the honor lies,” — but his doctrine is what we need. Scorn, obloquy, ignorance, and misrepresentation must create in us an antagonistic mood ; but rather than seek to learn it all, and let it cultivate a rankling spirit, let us, knowing the right, the right pursue, regardless of all others. We can admit ourselves to be boasters, because we have much to boast of ; and subserviency to foreign opinion of our conduct is almost as mischievous as it is absurd. The most frequent cry against us is, that our Administration is led by a mob, — that our Cabinet, afraid of losing

office, must follow the popular impulses. But the return of Mason and Slidell, when their recent capture was the theme of glowing popular rejoicement, was not only decided upon by the Government, but it was at once acquiesced in by the popular will, when brimming with pleasure at the blow given to "the Lion." Stand by the right, and ignore the shrieks of the British "thunderer." So, at home, ignore the voices of those who shriek for one idea. Keep the true issue clearly in view, and struggle on for that idea.

The action of calm minds, viewing the whole field and supported by public opinion, is what must bring about the close of the war. Perseverance, and the freedom from passion, are requisite for the development of the results of that mental action. We may look back with pleasure over the course of the Government thus far, and see how well this position has been adhered to. A self-important general issued an unauthorized proclamation of emancipation; but his flight of fancy made him a laughing-stock. He allowed impulse to control judgment, and did actual injury to his cause.

No mortal eye can foresee the course or the result of this war; but every man can tell where his present duty lies. "Stand by the flag!" Our national existence is at stake; and the "stars and stripes" mean something more than the mere chorus of a song. They are the emblem of the Union, which, now and for ever, is one and indivisible. If the

nation takes any standard of right other than the highest, it is marching over a quicksand. Let, therefore, the true issue be kept the only issue ; and let our toast and text and battle-cry be,— “Our Country.”

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